

An Optimistic Take on Pessimistic Pedagogy

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Trent Davis's essay on the pedagogy of pessimism has two linked analyses — one is dedicated to the problem of illusion and the other defends his notion of a "pedagogy of pessimism." In this short response essay, I offer some cursory criticisms of each of these analyses in turn. Although I am mostly sympathetic to Davis's claims, I argue that there are also some amendments and additions to these arguments that are worth considering.

THE PROBLEM OF ILLUSION

In the first section of his essay, Davis outlines the "problem of illusion" that he suggests is taking over our culture. He reprises Neil Postman's thesis that our current existence corresponds much more to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* dystopia than George Orwell's *1984*, and further argues that new information technology is exacerbating this problem and drawing us closer to the end result of a "consumption-based culture."

These are familiar arguments, and I have a lot of sympathy toward them. We are indeed a mass culture and we do like to amuse ourselves with our professional wrestling and "reality television." In some respects, I would be even more pessimistic in my diagnosis of our culture than Davis. I would argue that, in 2011, we are not living merely under the threat of a consumption-based culture — we *are* a consumption-based culture. As evidence, simply look at the panic that overtakes us when "consumer confidence is down," a phrase which merely signifies that people have decided to consume a slightly less enormous quantity of goods and services than they did last month. In addition to the tyranny of consumer confidence, we must also face the fact that the illusions of advertising have colonized the real to such an extent that these illusions are, in the pragmatic sense, the reality that matters most — if one wants to be seen as a person who is in touch with what is popularly regarded as "reality," one has to be in touch with consumer culture, since it is this culture that now structures everyday life.

My one significant point of difference with Davis's analysis here concerns his linking of the growth of illusion to the rise of information technology. He comments, "As information technology advances, so does our capacity to both produce and consume illusions that further increase our expectations." This statement is correct, but it is also too one-sided. Information technology also provides us with the means to attack illusions publicly and to great effect — compare the dynamic contemporary electronic media landscape to the information permafrost of the television-and-print-dominated 1980s. The Internet has provided us with an array of information sources to choose from, some of which provide excellent coverage. One can now attempt to distill a reasonably reliable version of reality from the multiple competing versions of it that are offered.

A PESSIMISTIC PEDAGOGY: POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS

In the second section of his account, Davis vaunts pessimism as providing a possible corrective to the problem of illusion. He quotes Joshua Dienstag, who suggests that the goal of pessimism is “not to depress us, but to edify us about our condition and fortify us for the life that lies ahead.”¹ If pessimism offers possibilities like this, we must ask how a pedagogy of pessimism might be possible.

Davis has already sketched out some promising approaches in his account, but I would like to add an additional wellspring of inspiration: writers of fiction who have enacted a pedagogy of pessimism in their work. Emile Zola is one of the most obvious examples in this regard — his twenty-novel Rougon-Macquart cycle is relentlessly pedagogical in its method and unwaveringly pessimistic in its outlook. The most famous novel in this cycle, *Germinal*, is a case in point. The plot of the novel is as follows: Etienne is a young itinerant worker who, desperate for work, finds a job at a mine in Northern France. The miners are desperately poor and are exploited at every turn by the mining company. As a result of these miserable conditions, Etienne leads the miners to begin a strike. Eventually, however, the miners are forced to return to work when their families begin to starve. The novel ends with a disastrous cave-in at the mine from which Etienne manages to escape. As Etienne walks away from the mine, heading towards Paris, Zola concludes the novel:

And beneath his feet, the deep blows, those obstinate blows of the pick, continued. His comrades were all there; he heard them following him at every stride ... in the fiery rays of the sun on this youthful morning, the country seemed full of that sound. Men were springing forth, a black avenging army, germinating slowly in the furrows, growing towards the harvests of the next century, and their germination would soon break forth upon the earth.²

One might say that, in *Germinal*, Zola starts with the bad news, only to end on a more optimistic (if ominous) note. To reprise Davis’s quote from Dienstag, Zola was trying to edify us about our condition and fortify us for the future. In *Germinal*, as in his other novels, Zola’s pessimism serves as a call to action, as a beacon toward social change and the prospects for an alternative future. It does not leave the reader paralyzed and resigned, but rather pushes toward future growth.

Zola shows us how a pedagogy of pessimism can be effective, but there are also substantial dangers involved in pursuing this type of pedagogy. As Davis notes, a possible response to pessimism is some type of resignation. There are certain types of resignation that might be useful (for example, becoming resigned to one’s own inevitable limitations), but one particularly worrisome type of resignation is characterized by a retreat from public life to the realm of the private. Thus, politics becomes “all bullshit anyway” and social change efforts become “big wastes of taxpayer time and money.” From the standpoint of democracy, this type of resignation is especially disquieting because it has the potential to weaken the underlying culture on which democracy depends. This type of resignation could also involve a retreat to the realm of illusion — once you’ve given up on the real, after all, you’ve got lots of time to watch your reality shows and sporting events.

An additional danger of a pessimistic pedagogy is that it could backfire by making the lives of the already miserable even more hopeless. Zola didn't write *L'Assommoir*, his brutal novel of working-class life in Paris, for the edification of the members of the working class. The working classes already knew how miserable their lives were. However, the middle and upper classes, which were complacent and self-satisfied, were in urgent need of this type of intervention. In general, a pessimistic pedagogy is best for those who are likely to be ignoring the "bad news" to begin with; a more hopeful pedagogy may be appropriate for people who are trapped in oppressed situations. This does not mean that difficult facts can simply be ignored, but, in cases where people already find themselves in difficult situations, the paralyzing effect of hopelessness must be countered somehow.

Davis is clearly aware of the dangers of pessimistic pedagogy; he offers an excellent discussion of how he "starts with the bad news" with his teacher candidates while simultaneously attempting to safeguard their basic faith in education. However, Davis occasionally seems to get caught up in his own pessimism. At one point, he makes the following comment:

Nel Noddings claims that "Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness." As much as I admire Noddings, I quickly realized it was unlikely that her text was going to be of much further help to me. As strange as it may seem, I wish her book had been called *Unhappiness and Education*.

The difficulty with this criticism is that it associates unhappiness and pessimism too closely. While I am entirely in agreement with Davis that the "bad news" has an important place in education, there is no necessary connection between pessimism and unhappiness. In fact, the two may be quite compatible. For example, if we postulated a Rousseauian definition of happiness (Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one of Dienstag's pessimists) as "equilibrium between power and the will," it is not difficult to see how one could be quite pessimistic and entirely content.³

Davis opens his essay with a quote from Annie Dillard, "For credibility's sake, let's start with the bad news."⁴ In the interest of ending with better news, I would argue that there is reason to be optimistic about a pedagogy of pessimism. If such a pedagogy can tell us hard truths without discouraging us unduly, it would render a significant service indeed.

1. Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), xi.

2. Émile Zola, *Germinal*, trans. Havelock Ellis (Lawrence, Kans.: Digireads, 2007), 277–78.

3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile* (Teddington, U.K.: Echo Library, 2007), 43.

4. Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Viking, 1999), 8.